

THE STRANGE-LOOKING MAN ¹

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From The Pagan

A TINY village lay among the mountains of a country from which for four years the men had gone forth to fight. First the best men had gone, then the older men, then the youths, and lastly the school boys. It will be seen that no men could have been left in the village except the very aged, and the bodily incapacitated, who soon died, owing to the war policy of the Government which was to let the useless perish that there might be more food for the useful.

Now it chanced that while all the men went away, save those left to die of slow starvation, only a few returned, and these few were crippled and disfigured in various ways. One young man had only part of a face, and had to wear a painted tin mask, like a holiday-maker. Another had two legs but no arms, and another two arms but no legs. One man could scarcely be looked at by his own mother, having had his eyes burned out of his head until he stared like Death. One had neither arms nor legs, and was mad of his misery besides, and lay all day in a cradle like a baby. And there was a quite old man who strangled night and day from having sucked in poison-gas; and another, a mere boy, who shook, like a leaf in a high wind, from shell-shock, and screamed at a sound. And he too had lost a hand, and part of his face, though not enough to warrant the expense of a mask for him.

All these men, except he who had been crazed by horror of himself, had been furnished with ingenious appliances to enable them to be partly self-supporting, and to earn enough to pay their share of the taxes which burdened their defeated nation.

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To go through that village after the war was something like going through a life-sized toy-village with all the mechanical figures wound up and clicking. Only instead of the figures being new, and gay, and pretty, they were battered and grotesque and inhuman.

There would be the windmill, and the smithy, and the public house. There would be the row of cottages, the village church, the sparkling waterfall, the parti-colored fields spread out like bright kerchiefs on the hillsides, the parading fowl, the goats and cows,—though not many of these last. There would be the women, and with them some children; very few, however, for the women had been getting reasonable, and were now refusing to have sons who might one day be sent back to them limbless and mad, to be rocked in cradles — for many years, perhaps.

Still the younger women, softer creatures of impulse, had borne a child or two. One of these, born the second year of the war, was a very blonde and bullet-headed rascal of three, with a bullying air, and of a roving disposition. But such traits appear engaging in children of sufficiently tender years, and he was a sort of village plaything, here, there, and everywhere, on the most familiar terms with the wrecks of the war which the Government of that country had made.

He tried on the tin mask and played with the baker's mechanical leg, so indulgent were they of his caprices; and it amused him excessively to rock the cradle of the man who had no limbs, and who was his father.

In and out he ran, and was humored to his bent. To one he seemed the son he had lost, to another the son he might have had, had the world gone differently. To others he served as a brief escape from the shadow of a future without hope; to others yet, the diversion of an hour. This last was especially true of the blind man who sat at the door of his old mother's cottage binding brooms. The presence of the child seemed to him like a warm ray of sunshine falling across his hand, and he

would lure him to linger by letting him try on the great blue goggles which he found it best to wear in public. But no disfigurement or deformity appeared to frighten the little fellow. These had been his playthings from earliest infancy.

One morning, his mother, being busy washing clothes, had left him alone, confident that he would soon seek out some friendly fragment of soldier, and entertain himself till noon and hunger-time. But occasionally children have odd notions, and do the exact opposite of what one supposes.

On this brilliant summer morning the child fancied a solitary ramble along the bank of the mountain-stream. Vaguely he meant to seek a pool higher up, and to cast stones in it. He wandered slowly straying now and then into small valleys, or chasing wayside ducks. It was past ten before he gained the green-gleaming and foam-whitened pool, sunk in the shadow of a tall gray rock over whose flat top three pine-trees swayed in the fresh breeze. Under them, looking to the child like a white cloud in a green sky, stood a beautiful young man, poised on the sheer brink for a dive. A single instant he stood there, clad only in shadow and sunshine, the next he had dived so expertly that he scarcely splashed up the water around him. Then his dark, dripping head rose in sight, his glittering arm thrust up, and he swam vigorously to shore. He climbed the rock for another dive. These actions he repeated in pure sport and joy in life so often that his little spectator became dizzy with watching.

At length he had enough of it and stooped for his discarded garments. These he carried to a more sheltered spot and rapidly put on, the child still wide-eyed and wondering, for indeed he had much to occupy his attention.

He had two arms, two legs, a whole face with eyes, nose, mouth, chin, and ears, complete. He could see, for he had glanced about him as he dressed. He could speak, for he sang loudly. He could hear, for he had turned quickly at the whir of pigeon-wings behind him. His

skin was smooth all over, and nowhere on it were the dark scarlet maps which the child found so interesting on the arms, face, and breast of the burned man. He did not strangle every little while, or shiver madly, and scream at a sound. It was truly inexplicable, and therefore terrifying.

The child was beginning to whimper, to tremble, to look wildly about for his mother, when the young man observed him.

"*Hullo!*" he cried eagerly, "if it isn't a child!"

He came forward across the foot-bridge with a most ingratiating smile, for this was the first time that day he had seen a child and he had been thinking it remarkable that there should be so few children in a valley, where, when he had travelled that way five years before, there had been so many he had scarcely been able to find pennies for them. So he cried "*Hullo,*" quite joyously, and searched in his pockets.

But, to his amazement, the bullet-headed little blond boy screamed out in terror, and fled for protection into the arms of a hurriedly approaching young woman. She embraced him with evident relief, and was lavishing on him terms of scolding and endearment in the same breath, when the traveler came up, looking as if his feelings were hurt.

"I assure you, Madam," said he, "that I only meant to give your little boy these pennies." He examined himself with an air of wonder. "What on earth is there about me to frighten a child?" he queried plaintively.

The young peasant-woman smiled indulgently on them both, on the child now sobbing, his face buried in her skirt, and on the boyish, perplexed, and beautiful young man.

"It is because he finds the Herr Traveler so strange-looking," she said, curtsying. "He is quite small," she showed his smallness with a gesture, "and it is the first time he has even seen a whole man."